"The Great War"

ADDRESS OF

JOSEPH B. CUMMING,

BEFORE

Camp 435,

United Confederate Veterans,

AUGUSTA, GA.

MEMORIAL DAY,

1902.

THE CHRONICLE JOB OFFICE,
AUGUSTA, GA.

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My Comrades:—It is forty-one years since the great war commenced. This day marks the thirty-seventh anniversary of its close. Of the thousands who survived its ravages, by far the greater part have, in the intervening years of peace, joined their comrades, who perished while it was still flagrant. Those who knew its realities and now preserve its memories; those who did their duty then and now enjoy that consciousness; those who then made sacrifices and now feel a just pride in recalling them—these are a small minority of those who first and last mustered under the Confederate Flag. During the war death untimely on the field an,d in the hospital, and death, during the long years of peace, in the order of nature and in the fullness of years has reaped the greater part of that mighty host. The remnant is relatively small ,and its disappearance is proceeding with accelerated velocity.

One of that fast diminishing remnant, addressing my comrades and fellows, I am not disposed to play the historian or chronicler. There is a great deal of that going on all the time. Do not for a moment, however, infer from the expression just used, that I would, if I could, discourage the work of the chronicler. It is from the plain simple sketches and narratives which individual soldiers are contributing out of the fullness of their experience, that the judicious historian of the future, when all passion is dead, when the last lingering resentment is in the grave, when politics and pensions no longer distort the view, will derive his truest color for his history of that period. But for myself, I prefer to devote a little time to the consideration of some of the vestiges of that momentous period as we find them in the thought and heart of the Present. Some reflections on that line give satisfaction; others kindle a feeling of sadness, in which is mingled a degree of vexation. We old fellows look back upon that glowing period of our lives with so much emotion, it stands out in our thoughts and feelings as so different in quality from the life of common times; the present with its commonplace pursuits and interests seems so small in comparison with that heroic age, that we feel disappointed, aye, vexed, at the lack in the generation, which has grown up since the war—our own children—of appreciation of the greatness, the solemn isolation of that tremendous epoch. This younger generation knows in a general way that forty years ago there was a war in the land. They also know that four years ago there was a war. They saw something of this last mentioned war. It was not much of an affair, they say, and justly. What differ-

ence, they say, between the war of forty years and four years ago? This younger generation is too busy with the struggles, the duties and the pleasures of the life of today to concern themselves with a dead and gone past. This is natural and perhaps we should not cherish any resentment, but we cannot escape a feeling of disappointment.

As those, who did not live in that time, or who, if living then, were not old enough or receptive enough to receive a true impression of it, and do not understand the then emotions of the actors therein, or the effect now of its memories on its survivors, let me endeavor to recall feebly at least the spirit of an unprecedented era.

What is man in the world's government but an instrument in the hand of its Ruler? How little we short-sighted mortals understand of His ways! How inscrutable to us His choice of methods to effect great changes here on His footstool! Shall we, gropers in the dark, presume to inquire whether the changes to be wrought out by war might not have been accomplished amid all the beatitudes of peace? Shall we impudently complain that the power which can order the hearts and minds of men as He wills, did not ordain that His purpose in this instance should be effected in amity and brotherly love? It is sufficient for us to know that the time had arrived in the government of the world when a great change was in order. For reasons which we cannot fathom, it was to come, like so many great mutations in the world's history, only through tears and blood. If tears and blood were to flow in rivers, then were it necessary that men should rise above the level of ordinary times. And thus it was ordered by the Supreme Ruler. A whole people was ennobled, elevated, sublimated. Human nature rose to its loftiest heights. For the time its selfish and its sordid parts were purged away. Gain, wealth, office, pleasure and the things generally for which men struggle and jostle each other in smaller times, were contemned by the spirit of that age, while it soared to nobler things. Self, whether asserted in self-seeking activity or manifested in self-indulgent ease, was for the time dethroned and the spirit of sacrifice reigned in its stead. We in the midst of a material and self-seeking age, whose atmosphere affects us all, scarcely recognize this as the same world or ourselves as those spiritually uplifted mortals of forty years ago. Is it strange, then, that we cherish tenderly and fondly the memory of days when we moved on a higher plane than now? At such times, we are hearing the voice of our better nature, speaking to us out of that nobler past, reminding us that we were not always engrossed in the selfish pursuits, which absorb us now, and that there was a time, when we were deaf to such things

and harkened only to the trumpet call of duty, summoning us to immeasurable sacrifices. At such times there rises before our eyes, not unapt to be dimmed with tears, the vision of a bet ter age, peopled with heroes, among whom we moved not wholly unworthy. Is it strange then, I say, that when anniversaries like this lead us back to a nobler past, in which we were at home, we feel an exaltation, which the commonplace present cannot give or take away?

I fear that with all my laboring I cannot make those, who were not dwellers in that period, comprehend either its spirit or the effect, which its memories have upon us who did live and move therein. They cannot understand us. Our language is strange to them. They marvel at the depth of our feelings. They regard us with a sort of patronizing pity. They are disposed to account charitably for our silly enthusiasm on the score of age. What more can be expected, they say to themselves, of a lot of old fellows, who, conscious of their impotence in the affairs of the living present, dream about, and in their dreams magnify, a dead past, in which they played their little part? We thank them for their amiable and charitable sentiments; but let us tell them with due modesty, that while we believe that they, who are of the same blood and lineage as ourselves, would, under the same circumstances, do as we did, strive as strenuously, suffer as cheerfully, be unselfish and self-denying as thoroughly, we have this advantage of them: We had the opportunity which they have not had, and which, God forbid, that they should. We have done what they would do. We have in our time risen to heights of devotion and conduct, to which they would rise, if the opportunity were given. And incomprehensible and ridiculous as it may seem, we are very proud of it. We feel on such anniversarries as this uplifted, for they take us back to a period in which, whatever we may have done and been since, our soul-life was on a higher plane than it has ever been at any other time. Aye, as I have said more than once, speaking as the representative of the average Confederate soldier: "That period of my life is the one with which I am the most nearly satisfied. A persistent, steady effort to do my duty—an effort persevered in in the midst of privation, hardship and danger. If ever I was unselfish, it was then. If ever I was capable of self-denial, it was then. If ever I was able to trample on self-indulgence, it was then. If ever I was strong to make sacrifices, even unto death, it was in those days; and if I were called upon to say on the peril of my soul, when it lived its highest life, when it was least faithless to true manhood, when it was most loyal to the best part of man's nature, I would an-

swer: "In those days when I followed a battle-torn flag through its shifting fortune of victory and defeat."

And now, my comrades, how easy it is to name the word that characterizes and strikes the key-note of that time and should explain our pride to all the world—*self-sacrifice*—that spirit and that conduct which raise poor mortals nearest to divinity. Oh, God in heaven, what sacrifices did we not make! How our very heart-strings were torn as we turned from our homes, our parents, our children—in some instances "the bride, was made the wedded wife yestreen!" How poor we were! How ragged! How hungry! When I recall the light-heartedness, the courage, the cheerfulness, the fidelity to duty which lived and flourished under such circumstances, from the bottom of my heart I thank God that for four long years I wore, if not brilliantly, at least faithfully and steadfastly, in camp and bivouac, in advance and retreat, on the march and on the battlefield, the uniform of a Confederate soldier.

I am very glad to receive from a most competent helper timely assistance in my feeble effort to portray the spirit of that age. In his recent noble oration in memory of McKinley, Secretary of State Hay has, with the gifts of a scholar and an orator, unfolded this subject. For we must, my comrades, recognize the truth that the same spirit prevailed among our foes. They, like ourselves, felt that they were fighting for their country. From our standpoint they were carrying on a war of conquest, which we were resisting with the indignation of patriots, defending our country against insolent and wicked invasion. Such was their spirit, and such was ours. Love of country was the source of both. Devotion to duty, as seen by each, was its life. And so Mr. Hay, in the oration to which I have referred, speaking of the young volunteer McKinley, uses language which applies to the youth of 1861 equally well, whether he donned the gray or the blue. He says: "It is not easy to give those of a later generation any clear idea of that extraordinary spiritual awakening which passed over the country at the first red signal fires of the war between the states. * * * I do not mean that in the north alone there was this austere wrestling with conscience. In the south as well, below all the effervescence and excitement of a people, perhaps more given to eloquent speech than we were, there was a profound agony of question and answer, the question to decide whether honor and freedom did not call them to revolution and war * * * The men who are living today and who were young in 1860, will never forget the glory and glamour which filled the earth and sky when the long twilight of uncertainty and doubt was ended and the time for action had come. * * * The fluttering of

the flag in the clear sky drew tears from the eyes of young men. Patriotism, which had been a rhetorical expression, became a passionate emotion, in which instinct, logic and feeling were fused. The country was worth saving; it could be saved only by fire. No sacrifice was too great; the young men of the country were ready for the sacrifice; come weal, come woe, they were ready.

"At seventeen years of age William McKinley heard this summons of his country. He was the sort of youth to whom a military life in ordinary times would possess no attractions. His nature was far different from that of the ordinary soldier. He had other dreams of life, its prizes and pleasures, than its marches and battles. But to his mind there was no choice or question. The banner floating in the morning breeze was the beckoning gesture of his country. The thrilling notes of the trumpet called him—him and no other—into the ranks."

I have thus, with the help borrowed from Mr. Hay, attempted with a view mainly to make our feelings understood, to reproduce the spirit in which we entered into the war. Let none of my hearers, whether old comrades or those others, who honor us with their presence, have any apprehension that I intend to take up the war itself—and with such a theme extend this discourse to a deadly length. I have no purpose to play the historian and attempt to describe campaigns and battles. I prefer to the narrative of foughten fields, however proud we justly are of them, the consideration of the mental and spiritual features of those times. So I shall say only of the war itself that the same exaltation of spirit, the same elevation above the material interests which rule in ordinary times, the same victory of self-denial, the same reign of sacrifice, with which the war commenced, endured to the end. For different reasons I shall not dwell upon the next period—a period in which from hatred, generated by the strife, or stupidity, or both, our conquerors undertook in our despite to reverse the order of civilization, to subordinate intelligence to ignorance, the superior race to the inferior, the Anglo-Saxon to the African. I refer, of course, to the hideous reconstruction period. Let us pass that by. Let us try to forget it; for its memory revives in our hearts a bitter hatred which four years of bloody war had not engendered. Let us think of this peaceful evening of our career, and take some account of some changes of view and of speech concerning the war. These changes, to which I refer, have all taken place among our former foes. We have not changed. We felt from the beginning that we were right. We feel the same way now. I have yet to meet the Confederate soldier, who does not believe that the principle on

which he fought was right. Whatever may be his view as to the wisdom of this great country remaining united under one government, and however unreservedly he may concede that the issue of the war settled for all time that it was to be so united, he accepts that conclusion as the decision of the sword, and not the logical outcome of the argument. Placing himself back in 1861, he knows that his state had the right to secede from one confederacy and join in forming another. He knows that he was never a rebel. He is sure that while he did his part to the best of his ability in a great war, he never took part in a rebellion. He knows that he did his best to repel the invasion of his country, but he is certain that he was never untrue to his allegiance. These were his sentiments then, they continue with him now, and they will accompany him to his grave. No change has come over us.

But the views of our brethren of the north seem to have changed somewhat in this respect. They begin to see that great struggle in its true light. They begin to recognize the fact that great organized communities (sovereign states we regarded them), in population five times more numerous than the revolted colonists in revolutionary times, and in territorial extent a vast empire, were united with practical unanimity in upholding political doctrines, which history, tradition and logic approved, though statesmanship and expediency might condemn. They begin to admit that we were not resisting lawful authority. We were not seeking to overturn any government. History, tradition or logic never warranted the application of the term "rebellion," to that great struggle—and the people of the north have begun and more than begun to see that truth. How the words "rebel" and "rebellion" are passing out of use. Here and there there may be some paltry creature, narrow, rancorous, with small brain and smaller soul, like that idiot of a Grand Army camp commander in Washington, I believe, who recently made a spectacle of his silly self by proclaiming that we "were and everlastingly shall be rebels." But generally you will find in the current speech and literature of the north, instead of the old nonsense, "rebel" and "rebellion," the words "Confederate" and "Civil War." This is of interest to us, not as marking the disuse of terms for which we cared not in the least, but as marking progress in the north's true appreciation of that great struggle. But the phrase "Civil War," while marking an advance towards the truth, is still not correct. It was not a civil war. The true conception of a civil war is that of a war between opposing parties in the same state or kingdom—a conflict in which communities are disrupted, families divided, brother arrayed against brother. Our war had none of those fea-

tures. There was no division in Georgia, for instance. There was no friction of the machinery of goverment. There was no suspension of civil law. There was no closing of courts. There was no resistance to the tax gatherer. No portion of the citizens of Georgia were fighting any other portion. The secession of the state had not changed the relations of its citizens to the state or to each other. All internal affairs remained in their normal condition. All things pertaining to government went on as if nothing had happened. What was true of Georgia was true of all the other states of the Confederacy. All that vast region between the Potomac and the Rio Grande was solid and undivided, and its population was united with practical unanimity. That wide empire and that great population, presided over by one organized government and living under the folds of one flag, was at war, not with parts of itself, but with a great outside power. Such a contest does not meet our understanding of "civil war." In the border states of Kentucky and Missouri where the people were divided among themselves, that phrase could be used with more propriety. But as to the great struggle as a whole, "civil war" is a misuse of language and a perversion of history. The accurate and exact appellation of that war was given by Mr. Stephens, when in 1867 he wrote his book, "The War Between the States." That was what it was; no "rebellion," no "civil war," but a war between a majority of the states, united in a government retaining the name of United States, and a minority of the states, united in a government assuming the name of "Confederate States." The only objection to the name is its length. It is too long for a busy people, who are disposed to be as brief as possible in their speech and have no time, for instance, to say telephone or telegram, but must needs shorten them to "phone" and "wire." Then why not drop "rebellion," "civil war," "war between the states," and call it simply "The Great War?" There is no danger that any well informed person will be misled or in doubt by reason of that designation. It was not only a great war, but 'The Great War." When, in the tide of time, has there been one greater or so great? None of which we have any authentic history. We read, but not without distrust, of Xerxes' army of a million men. The north put in the field more than two million. The vast host of Xerxes was marshalled against a few score thousands of Greeks—a mere handful to the armies, which, though inferior in numbers to the armies of the north, marched by hundreds of thousands first and last under the southern banner. Great as compared with all other wars in the numbers engaged, it was relatively greater in the area of its operations. Great in the size of its armies, greater in the vastness of its area, it was

greater still in the number of its battles—an average of a battle for every week of the four years of its duration—battles, not skirmishes, many of them Shilohs and Gettysburgs—not San Juans and El Caneys. Greater still in its slain, its wounded, its rivers of blood. Greatest of all in the noble sentiments which actuated the combatants on either side. "The Great War" then, let it be in our speech and our school books, as well as in our memories.

My comrades, we are taking a long look backward today. When we face about and look the other way, there is but a little space to be swept by our mortal vision. We know not what those few remaining years may bring, but we do know what they cannot take away. They cannot take from us the recollection that we were good soldiers in "The Great War." They cannot rob us of our just pride in that fact. They cannot, while life lasts, stop the quickened rhythm of our hearts, whenever we recall those days of duty and sacrifice.